

PARABLES | The Rich Man and Lazarus

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Introduction

Have you ever heard someone say something like, “I respect the teachings of Jesus, but I could never believe in a God that allows Hell to exist. Jesus taught about love, mercy, forgiveness, all good things... I respect that, so I respect Jesus. But a God that makes room for hell... I can't respect a God like that.”

There's a problem with that position. Because Jesus, who didn't just give revolutionary teachings on love, mercy, and forgiveness, *He lived out what He taught.* Jesus, at the very same time, taught more extensively on the topic of hell than anyone else in the entirety of scripture. In fact, Jesus wove together teachings of love and hell so intricately that you can't actually say, “*You can't join the concept of judgment and hell with a loving God.*”

In essence that position says, “*I'm more compassionate, more justice oriented, more loving, more merciful than Jesus.*”

I also want you to see that the doctrine of hell actually gives you the power to be a person of love, mercy, forgiveness, in an incredibly profound and unique way.

Luke 16 is not a traditional parable in the sense that you have a God figure, a Jesus figure, and someone who represents us — but you'll see how it applies.

Luke 16:19-31

“There was **a rich man** who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And **at his gate** was laid a poor man named **Lazarus**, covered with sores, ²¹ who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. ²⁴ And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ ²⁵ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ ²⁷ And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— ²⁸ for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ ³⁰ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’ ”

The danger with parables is that they can be so easily misinterpreted. We have to allow the *whole* of scripture help us interpret scripture. So let me just clarify that the point of this parable is NOT that rich people go to hell and poor people go to heaven. If that were the case, we're all in trouble. That's not Jesus' point.

What is Jesus' point?

One of the first things in this parable that's unique from all the others, is that in all the other parables, none of the characters have names. Not one. It's father, or vinedresser, or a builder... it's a title or description, but never a name... except here. Jesus gives the poor man a name. In contrast, the other character is nameless.

Why is that? And why does one of them go to hell, and the other to paradise (Abraham's side)?

Let's start with the rich man — because you might say, *“Oh he went to hell because his wealth was acquired unethically, insider trading, maybe he was drug lord... whatever it was, must have been awful!”* Jesus doesn't tell us, it just says, He was a rich man.

The name of the poor man, Lazarus — means “God is my help.”

- *Here's what this tells us... what lands the someone in hell is not being rich or poor... **it's where you help comes from.*** It's what you look to for your salvation. Your identity. For you value. What you're building your life on.
- And the reason why the rich man doesn't have a name is because that's all he was. His wealth was His God. He was building his own kingdom. And wealth was his help, it was the epicenter, the foundation of his life.

This is why in vs 25 Abraham says...

Luke 16:25

“Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things,”

You got what you wanted... and when you take away the riches... there's nothing left. There's no substance. There's no depth. There's no resilience. There's no identity. It's hollow.

But a person whose help is the Lord, you can take away every single pleasure this world has to offer and, in the end, they still have the Lord. God is still their help. Why? *Because God is the only One we can have now that will remain constant through eternity!*

- Your riches will fade, your reputation will fade, your career will fade, your possessions will fade — it all will pass away, and if you make those things the center of your life, like the rich man did with his wealth. In the end, you'll be a rich man with no riches. A powerhouse with no power. A beauty queen with no beauty.
- **APPLICATION:** Jesus is telling us, *“Make me your help! Forsake all other loves, and center your life on Me, and you'll have a name! You'll have substance. And steadiness, a resilience about you that circumstance can't touch!*
 - *Or else, in the end, you will find yourself utterly empty, hollow, and devoid of significance, substance, and meaning.*

The question for us... what is your help? What do you look to in order to make yourself okay? When hard times come... what is your first instinct? You gut reaction? It's okay, I've got money. It's okay, at least I'm attractive. It's okay, at least I have my reputation. Is it the fact that you're a mother, or a father? Is it that you have influence? Power? Wealth? Is it beauty and attractiveness?

- **Is there anything wrong with those things?** It's when you make those good things into the ULTIMATE things, that your whole life gets twisted and your become HOLLOW!
- Another way to say it is — there's nothing wrong with being attractive, or wealthy, or successful, or having a good reputation! There isn't anything wrong with being any of those things. But this is the question, **“Is that ALL you are? Is that your sole source of help?”**

How could a loving God send people to hell?

Luke 16:24

²⁴“And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’”

- Do you see what the rich man *doesn't* ask for?
- What would you ask for if you were in his shoes? *“Let me out! Have mercy on me and let me out of here!”* But he doesn't ask for that.

What does he ask for? Because he doesn't JUST ask for water... what does he say? He says, send Lazarus... that poor beggar... that nobody... that servant, that slave — send him to do my bidding.

Do you see the coldness in the heart of this man? The hollowness of his soul? He's still operating in a worldly paradigm that is long gone. This man is saying, "I don't belong here! Lazarus does! I'm better than he is... I'm more powerful than he is, I have means... more wealth than he does, therefore, make that poor beggar serve me and bring me water..."

"Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others... but you are still distinct from it. You may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop it. But there may come a day when you can no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine. It is not a question of God "sending us" to hell. In each of us there is something growing, which will be hell unless it is nipped in the bud."¹
~ C.S. Lewis

The grumbling mood always begins with a self-centeredness and unchecked self-absorption. The more centered you are on yourself, the prouder you are, the more distorted your life becomes — the louder the grumble becomes. "Everybody else is wrong, and I alone am right. Nobody understands me. Everybody's out to get me. Everything's wrong with my life. Nothing goes right for me."

- ***You know what that is?*** According to Lewis, it's the grumbling mood that will grow in you until there is no you left at all. All you'll have left is a bitter, self-justifying, proud grumble that will last forever. That is hell.
 - The doors of hell are locked from the inside.
 - *How unloving would it be if someone spent their entire life trying to get away from God, for God to say, "Too bad, now you're going to spend eternity with me."*

"There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'"²
~ C.S. Lewis

If you're so adamant to get away from God — in the end — He'll simply give you what you want. He will not force His way into your life — or force you into His.

How could a loving God allow a place like hell to exist?

The rich man in hades 1) doesn't ask to leave, 2) is ordering Lazarus around, 3) then he says, if you won't send him to give me a drop of water... then what?

Luke 16:27-28

And he said, "Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment."

- You know what he's saying? "God, you didn't give me enough information! It's your fault that I'm here. I'm not asking to leave... I don't want to change it! But it's your fault I'm here! If only you had sent someone to warn me, then I would have gotten it. But no, you didn't do enough, God."
 - The fact that Jesus, the One sent from God to reveal God to humanity — is telling this story, is so unbelievably ironic.

If it's true, that Hell begins with a grumbling mood and goes on into eternity — then **hell is the inevitable outcome of a freely chosen identity — on anything other than God.**

¹ Joshua Ryan Butler. *The Skeletons in God's Closet* (Thomas Nelson, October 21, 2014) p. 79

² Stewart Goetz. *The Purpose of Life* (Bloomsbury Publishing, July 12, 2012)

***How could a loving God allow a place like hell to exist?
My question is, “How could He not!?”***

How would you feel about that if someone did something horrible to one of your family members? One of your children? Someone looked at you and said, “Well, God is a God of love, so He’s letting everyone in.” If that’s you, you will not be thinking, “Oh, God is so loving!” You’d be thinking, “That’s the most unjust, unloving thing God can do!”

The doctrine of hell is actually not only fair and just, not only does it make God FAR MORE loving, not less; *the doctrine of hell actually gives you the power to forgive the unforgivable.*

EXAMPLE:

In April of 2017 there were two bombings in churches in Egypt, killing 43 people — siblings, spouses, parents, children. Isis took credit for it. There were interviews conducted by a Muslim reporter. As he’s interviewing one woman who lost loved ones — she looks at the camera and says “*I forgive you. May God forgive you. I don’t hate you. You sent my husband to a place that I’ve only ever dreamed of. I forgive you.*”

The Muslim reporter doing the interview was silent for about 20 seconds — then looks at the camera and says, “*Egyptian Christians are made of steel. Who has this kind of power to forgive?*”

**If there is no judgment,
if there is no promise of inevitable and ultimate justice
from an all- powerful, all-knowing God —
then it’s on us to exercise justice.
Vengeance is not the Lord’s, it’s on us.**

PERSONAL: If something happened to my children or my wife, God forbid... and I don’t believe that God will make everything right one day — What will I do? What are my options?

See, Universalism, the belief that God will just save everyone, no matter what they believe or how they behave... that’s actually incredibly unloving. It says, “*You can murder, you can rape, you can use and abuse anyone and everyone, and you’re coming to heaven anyway.*” That kind of a God is not a God that’s worth worshipping. Only if God is a God of judgment, then and only then do I have POWER to look at someone that has done something horrendous and unthinkable to me or someone I love and say, “*I forgive you. May God forgive you.*” Because I know that one day, He will right every wrong! He will bring justice! Which makes Him MORE LOVING not LESS!

***Unless you understand the doctrine of hell
you can’t understand how loving God actually is.***

What does the rich man ask Abraham for his five brothers?

Luke 16:30

“And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’”

- Send Lazarus back from the dead! They’ll believe if you send him!

Our gut reaction to this is, “Well, of course they would believe if someone comes to them from the dead and says, “*Hey, your brother is in hell, and he sent me to tell you so you wouldn’t go there.*”

- **Q:** What are they going to say? “*Oh man! I better get my act together! That sounds terrible and now we have evidence that hell really does exist!*”
 - The irony is that Jesus did raise a man from the dead, his name was happened to be Lazarus... and the Pharisees didn’t believe. Instead, they were more fervent in their scheming to kill both Jesus and Lazarus!

- Jesus Himself was raised from the dead — and even the resurrection of a man they murdered was not enough — a miracle is not enough.

What does Abraham say to this request?

Luke 16:31

He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'

- **What does that mean?**

What Jesus is showing is that the fear of hell is not enough to save you, or even change you. Why? Because it's still all about you! You're just as self-absorbed, just in a different way than before! Your heart won't change. Why? Because the fear of hell will only motivate you to try harder to be a moral person — for the purpose of self-preservation.

You'll do exactly what the Pharisees did. Use God to justify yourself — but there is no delight in God... there is no joy in God, there's no life in God, there's no peace, no power. It's a life saturated with fear, ruled by a self-willed religious morality, which only makes your heart colder toward God and more disdainful of toward others that aren't trying as hard as you are.

Do you understand, that is the beginnings of hell, not the avoidance of it!

How does our heart change?

So, how does our heart change? Well, what does Jesus say? What does He point to? Radical, sacrificial love.

Luke 16:29

But Abraham said, 'They have **Moses and the Prophets**; let them hear them.'

- Do you realize that in the writings of Moses and the prophets, you find out not only *that* the Messiah would suffer... but you discover WHY he would suffer? **You will never understand how much Jesus loves you until you see how much He suffered for you.**

Did you notice how Jesus described the rich man?

Luke 16:19

There was a rich man who was **clothed in purple...**

- A purple robe is a symbol of royalty, of wealth, of power. And the rich man, clothed in royalty, in splendor, wealth and power, leveraged all of it for his own comfort, to distance himself from suffering.

And yet look at Jesus...

Mark 15:17-20

And they **clothed Him in a purple cloak**, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on Him. ¹⁸ And they began to salute Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" ¹⁹ And they were striking His head with a reed and spitting on Him and kneeling down in homage to Him. ²⁰ And when they had mocked Him, they stripped Him of the purple cloak and put His own clothes on Him. And they led Him out to crucify Him.

John 19:1-3

Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged Him ² And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head and **arrayed Him in a purple robe**. ³ They came up to Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck Him with their hands.

A God who lacked nothing, in need of nothing, the king of all, the One in whom and through whom all things consist... did not reserve His royalty, wealth, and power for Himself... but instead traded His very life for the poor man lying at the gate.

Jesus left heaven, took on the suffering of the beggar, so that the beggars (you and I) could have a seat at His table!

Do you see the LOVE of Jesus for you?! Do you see what He did for you?! **We're all outside the gate... begging, clamoring for the scraps of this world, anything that will satisfy our hunger.** And Jesus, the only One with true wealth laid it all down; and on the cross, took on hell itself, the sin of the world upon His shoulders — so that you and I would no longer be beggars but sons! Daughters! Children of the Most High.

Why did Jesus speak more about hell than anyone else in the Bible put together? Because he was showing us what he was about to take upon Himself.

God, in Jesus Christ took on hell itself, for you.

He saw us in our helpless state... in all of our sickness and sin... all of the moments we make earthly things into ultimate things... all of our spiritual poverty. He took it upon Himself so that we could enter in... so that we could have a home. Jesus took on hell itself; and looking at you and me from the cross saying all of this, every ounce of it, it's all for you. Because I love you more than you could ever imagine. I want you to know the depth of my love, how far I'll go *for you*. You are my treasure.

Does that not do something in your heart?

Does that not disorient your selfishness?

Does it not motivate you to throw yourself at His feet and just say, "Oh God, thank you!"

Discussion Questions

1. How is this parable unique from all the others... re: characters in the parable?
2. Why did the rich man go to hell? What action shows the coldness in his heart?
3. Why did the poor man go to be with Father Abraham? What does his name mean?
4. What do you look to in order to make yourself okay? What is your help?
5. How unloving would it be if someone spent their entire life trying to get away from God, for God to say, "Too bad, now you're going to spend eternity with me."
6. How does the rich man's request for a warning to be sent to his brothers show his blame of his situation on God?

NOTES